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# Exploring Organizational Identity and Interpersonal Conflict in Sport Organizations

Shannon Kerwin

## Abstract

Interpersonal conflict is a dysfunctional group process that requires scholarly attention. Despite support for this claim, there is a gap in theoretical knowledge regarding the antecedent conditions to interpersonal disagreement in sport organizations. As such, the tenets of social identity theory were used to explore if and how organizational identity influences the perception of conflict in the regional sport commission context. A multi-method qualitative approach was adopted to serve the purpose of this study. The findings indicate that organizational identity is present, in-group/out-group identity formation contributes to status conflict, and that both formal and informal leadership play a role in the development of organizational identity and the management of in-group/out-group formation within this context. These findings have implications for how identity is conceptualized and measured in the sport management context and support the continued examination of the role of social identity as an antecedent condition for interpersonal conflict.

**Keywords:** *Conflict, identity, voluntary-based sport organizations*

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Hoye and Cuskelly (2007) describe the structure of voluntary-based, regional sport organizations as including both paid staff and volunteer boards of directors where board-staff relations can create a physical divide and struggles for power. It may be assumed that the result of these struggles is divided or inconsistent identification targets among employees and board members. For example, individuals may no longer identify with the organization, but rather a subgroup within the organization. Specifically, this context has the potential to create organizational attribute categories (e.g., volunteer board member versus paid staff) that foster in-group/out-group formation. Given the geographic and functional separation that may exist between paid staff and volunteer boards of directors within local or regional sport organizations (Hums & MacLean, 2009), interaction between these two groups of individuals may be fragmented and strained. Further, the very nature of volunteer-based, regional sport organizations requires paid and non-paid individuals to work interdependently to contribute to decision making and organizational performance. Thus, this mutually dependent relationship has the potential to cause strain and create power struggles that result in in-group/out-group formation, which can lead to “faultlines” between in and out group members (Bezrukova, Thatcher, Jehn, & Spell, 2011).

In general, the recognition of the psychological group has made a major contribution to understanding the effect of groups on individuals (see Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992). Turner (1984) defined the psychological group as “a collection of people who share the same social identification or define themselves in terms of the same social category membership” (p. 530). Moreover, staff within a given organization—both paid and non-paid individuals—may classify themselves based on a variety of social categories including organizational or departmental attributes. Thus, subgroups based on in-group/out-group categorization are essentially created. For instance, an individual who is a volunteer board member in his or her local sport commission may strongly relate to the goals, mission, and vision of the commission, and thus identification is targeted toward the organization as a whole. Conversely, a marketing manager within a sport organization may identify with other employees in the marketing and sponsorship department whereas that same individual may not identify with employees in the finance and accounting department. In this case, identification is more accurately described as targeted toward a subgroup or “in-group”—the department. Todd and Kent (2009) argue that sport employees, in particular, receive emotional benefits from group membership (e.g., employment) in a sport organization, which may influence important job-related outcomes such as work behaviors. Given the affective connection that sport employees tend to possess toward their sport employee identities (Todd & Kent, 2009), it is reasonable to assume that emotional responses result when interaction between in-group and out-group members is present.

Voluntary sport organizations in particular may be prone to in-group/out-group formation based on the divergent demographic composition of paid staff

versus board of directors. In many cases, paid employees tend to be young adults who are securing their employment position directly out of college or university, whereas volunteer board members may be mature adults who have held various roles (e.g., athlete, coach) within their sport organization before securing a volunteer role with the board of directors. Given the varying personal values between generations and the divergent level of experience (i.e., organizational tenure) within a sport organization, it may be assumed that an “old guard versus new guard” mentality is adopted. Specifically, Hamm, MacLean, Kikulis, and Thibault (2008) found that differences between stated personal values of paid employees (shorter tenure, younger) and volunteer board members (longer tenure, older) created an unwritten divide within an organization. Furthermore, participants in their study noted that certain roles and departments in sport organizations may be prone to separation from other departments given the nature of work that is done. Although a characteristic of many organizations, these features may be unique to sport organizations in that there is significant variation across sport organizations in terms of where the balance of power lies and how subgroups are divided (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003). As such, the identification and management of in-group/out-group formation may be problematic and the source of conflict in the sport context.

Recent sport management research (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010; Kerwin, Doherty, & Harman, 2011) has established the need to examine the antecedents of intragroup conflict between volunteer board members in voluntary-based sport organizations. Their results suggested that intense relationship conflict was defined by challenges of position and conflicting personalities. Moreover, intense task conflict was perceived to be reduced by similar priorities and values of board members. Interestingly, compatible values and priorities are corner stones to social identity formation in that perceived similarity to other individuals can result in the development of an in-group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, an organizational identity may reduce the intensity of conflict in the sport context. Similarly, Verhoeven et al. (1999) state that “lack of common interest” among volunteers causes conflict in voluntary sport organizations, which provides further credence to the potential influence of identity (of lack thereof) on staff behaviors in the sport context. Despite this intuitive connection, empirical examination and confirmation of the link between social identity and conflict remains relatively nonexistent in the literature. Filling this gap in knowledge has potential implications for both sport conflict theory and sport management practice.

The focus here is on extending organizational behavior in sport research and dissecting the role of social identity as an antecedent condition to interpersonal conflict between volunteer board members and paid staff; an association that is ripe for empirical inquiry in the voluntary-based sport context. Relevant to the current study, knowledge regarding the nature of each type of interpersonal conflict and their antecedent conditions may be enhanced by application of social

identity theory. Specifically, exploring what individuals identify with and how that identity influences interpersonal conflict is particularly relevant in the voluntary-based context where a tangible divide in social identity (e.g., paid staff versus board members) already exists.

As such, the purpose of this paper is to examine how social identity influences status and compatibility conflict in regional sport commissions within one state in the United States; a context that is similar to other voluntary-based sport domains that provide “programming that positively impacts the lives of hundreds of thousands of participants” (Hums & MacLean, 2009, p. 136). To serve this purpose, three research questions are posited:

R1: Do organizational identity and in-group/out-group formation exist within regional sport commissions?

R2: Is in-group/out-group formation associated with perceptions of interpersonal conflict?

R3: What factors are perceived to influence the association between organizational identity and conflict?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory maintains that social categories involve a hierarchical system of power and that “some categories have greater power, prestige, status, and so on, than others (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 14). Cunningham (2007) examined diversity within intercollegiate athletic departments and found that common in-group identity had a significant influence on group effectiveness. The propositions in Cunningham’s model are based on tenets of social identity and social categorization theory that suggest individuals have an innate need to maintain high self-esteem. Thus, individuals make social comparisons to others in their environment to ensure high levels of esteem are achieved. Paramount to the purpose of this paper is the contention that in order to make social comparisons individuals must classify themselves, and others, into groups.

As described by Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999), identification is a broad multidimensional construct that includes perceived inclusion with the group (self-categorization), evaluation of membership in the group (collective esteem), and emotional involvement with the group (group commitment; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Specifically, self-categorization can occur for a number of reasons; however, once an individual has self-categorized themselves there is an evaluation of what it means to possess membership in a group. For instance, with regards to the old guard versus new guard categorization found in Hamm et al. (2008), individuals in sport organizations may classify themselves as “new guard” and positively identify with that label; however, it is possible that individuals who self-

classify under this “new guard” label will evaluate the label negatively in certain sport contexts (e.g., golf, steeped with rich history and tradition).

Finally, there is often emotional involvement attached to self-classifying into a group. Specifically, Hamm et al. (2008) identified functional and departmental separation, which in turn lead to strong group commitment and identity focused solely on the function (e.g., accountant) or department; not the organization as a whole.

Interestingly, each component of social identity has the ability to impact how individuals interact with one another in a group, where Ellemers et al. (1999) note that this behavioral impact may not always be positive. As such, the use of social identity theory may provide a valuable lens to examine how status and compatibility conflict emerge within regional sport commissions. According to social identity theory, staff and board members may begin to define themselves in terms of an individual, group, or organizational identity. As such, labeling others as being a part of that identity may result in the creation of in-group and out-group classifications (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The creation of identity classification may inevitably result in direct comparisons to others regarding desired personality traits of members and level of status between in- and out-group members. These comparisons in turn may have a direct negative influence on outcomes. Specifically, Cunningham (2007) found that “groups containing in-group and out-group members do not function as well as those groups that contain only in-group members” (p. 61). Furthermore, Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois (2003) emphasized that a potential outcome of in-group and out-group identity is conflict or disagreement.

Research has shown that interdependent relationships within organizations have the potential to create competition for status in and amongst groups (e.g., Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Moreland, Levine, & McMinn, 2001). Status is defined by how one perceives others to regard them; where the desire to possess status can create conflict or tension among social hierarchies (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Bendersky & Hays, 2010). Bendersky et al. (2010) recently posited that status conflict is a factor within the overarching concept defined as interpersonal conflict (previously labeled relationship conflict; Jehn, 1995). Indeed, interpersonal conflict has been conceptualized into status, compatibility, and commitment conflict types that reflect disagreement between individuals within groups (Bendersky et al., 2010). Although a significant contribution to understanding the nature of intragroup conflict, the antecedent conditions to each type of interpersonal conflict have received little, if any, scholarly attention (Bendersky et al., 2010). A research gap that is particularly relevant given the dysfunctional nature of personal-related disagreement (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

Exploring what individuals identify with (i.e., identity targets; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010), and how identity contributes to the development of interpersonal

conflict may be particularly relevant in voluntary-based organizations where a tangible divide in social identity (paid staff versus board members) already exists (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Moreover, Kreutzer and Jager (2011) found that conflict among volunteers and paid staff in voluntary-based organizations was associated with diverse perceptions of organizational identity. Thus, exploring the dyadic relationship between in-group/out-group members may be pertinent to understanding group functioning and effectiveness (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Moreland et al., 2001).

### Interpersonal Conflict

Separation between organizational members (e.g., paid staff and volunteer board members, old versus new guard, departmental divides) can potentially increase the perception of conflict and the creation of in-group and out-group membership (e.g., Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Soares, Correia, & Rosado, 2010). This contextual condition may increase the need to foster an organizational identity for the purpose of reducing “us-verses-them” classifications that are acknowledged in social identity theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As suggested by Mael and Ashforth (1992), when an employee identifies most readily with the organization itself, she/he will refer to others as “we” instead of “them.” This is critical to operations within organizations as common in-group identity can reduce power struggles and interpersonal disagreement (Hobman et al., 2003).

*Interpersonal conflict* consists of incompatible personality and communication styles, aggressive statements about the utility of different ideas, influence and power within a group, and challenges to the relative contribution an individual makes to a group (Bendersky et al., 2010). Interpersonal conflict is problematic in that status and compatibility disagreements are often associated with decreased satisfaction, motivation, and individual performance (Bendersky et al., 2010). Moreover, *Compatibility conflict* is defined as disagreements that involve incompatible personalities or work styles that are evidenced in the way individuals treat each other. For example, two individuals within a group may both possess overbearing personalities. These are not necessarily different personalities, but their communication styles may not be compatible during interaction. *Status conflict* is defined as disputes over an individual’s relative status position in their social hierarchy; often characterized by conflict over control, power, and respect (Bendersky & Hays, 2010). For instance, disagreement over who has more power in the decision making process may occur at a board meeting between an executive director (paid) and board president (non-paid volunteer). In this case, both are senior level of managers; however, their level of control may be disputed. Therefore, conflict or tension amongst individuals may be directly related to establishing one’s position or identity in a group or organization (Bendersky & Hays, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bendersky et al. (2010) also defined *commitment conflict*. Given that this type of disagreement refers to contributions to task related activities, and paid staff and volunteer board members typically do not work interdependently on tasks, this type of conflict was not examined here.



Kerwin and colleagues (2010, 2011) established the important influence of intragroup conflict on group functioning in voluntary-based sport organizations. In their study involving volunteer board member participants, they uncovered that task and interpersonal conflicts had a negative impact on decision quality, satisfaction, and commitment. The dysfunctional association of conflict, satisfaction and commitment in voluntary-based sport organizations has received consistent support in the sport literature (Kerwin & Doherty, 2010; Kerwin et al., 2011; Mills & Schulz, 2009), highlighting the need to uncover the factors contributing to each conflict type. However, relatively little is known about the antecedent conditions to the various conflict types (Kerwin et al., 2011). The paucity of literature leaves a theoretical gap regarding the process and outcomes of conflict in sport organizations.

### **Influencing Identity and Conflict**

When examining the presence of organizational identity and conflict in sport organizations, it may be particularly relevant to assess factors that influence this association. In particular, Kerwin, Doherty, and Harman (2011) found that leaders within non-profit sport boards influenced the presence of personal conflicts in that strong, active leadership was able to reduce the potential for intense relationship disagreements. A number of participants in their study discussed the role leaders played in developing a common goal or identity for the group in order to thwart dysfunctional conflict or disagreement.

Moreover, shared leadership may be of specific interest to the associations outlined here. Shared leadership is defined as an interactive process where members of a group influence one another toward the achievement of group goals (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Given the dual leadership structure of voluntary-based sport organizations (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003), the potential role of shared leadership in the association between identity development and conflict requires further investigation. Interestingly, Auld and Godbey (1998) suggested that it is the responsibility of multiple leaders to ensure that all group members feel as though they are making a contribution to decision making. Without the feeling of contribution, group members (e.g., employees, board members) may develop apathy toward their work and colleagues (Auld & Godbey, 1998). Further, Shilbury (2001) found that individuals seek shared control and leadership directly through the influence they perceive in the planning process, which may have a direct influence on the evaluation and emotional components of organizational identity.

### **Method**

A multi-method qualitative approach was taken to conduct this research. First, a preliminary analysis of basic demographic and psychometric data obtained from regional sport commissions in one State in the United States was used to select the case study. The questionnaire contained items relating to the presence of a sport commission identity and interpersonal conflict (i.e., status and compat-



ibility), where each item was rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A sequential explanatory strategy (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007) was used where the quantitative results were the benchmark for qualitative inquiry. This preliminary data provided information on the level of conflict and social identity rated by volunteer board members and staff. This data allowed for the selection of a positively deviant sport organization for investigation in this study.

### Positively Deviant Case

As noted by Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn (2003) examining positively deviant contexts that possess extreme positive scores have the potential to significantly contribute to theory regarding key phenomenon. They note that positive deviance is defined by behavior that goes above and beyond expectations where individuals within organizations do extraordinary things to promote well-being (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). The explanation is that, “key explanatory elements are identified that account for [positive] past successes, and a vision for the future is crafted based on what was extraordinarily successful and what can be perpetuated in the future” (p. 8). More simply, we can learn from the actions of positively deviant cases and attempt to uncover effective management strategies of key organizational phenomena. Given Kreutzer and Jager’s (2011) contention that fragmented perceptions of organizational identity are extremely dysfunctional, examining a context that is particular strong in organizational identification may contribute to knowledge regarding thwarting these negative outcomes.

Given the focus on positive deviance, the case study was selected based on the recommendations of Cameron et al. (2003) and the identification of the highest sport commission identity score from the preliminary data ( $M = 6.78$  on a 7-point Likert scale). Furthermore, based on extensive interactions with all commission staff and board members during their board meetings and at a national sport commission conference prior to data collection, potential for in-group/out-group formation was identified within the commission. However, the functionality of the selected sport commission has been noted by the National Association of Sport Commissions (NASC), and thus the members of the commission (paid staff and volunteer board members) were deemed positively deviant in their ability to manage the impact of in-group/out-group identity formation. As such, the definition of the chosen case study was considered appropriate as a positively deviant regional sport organization, and judged as a credible context for examining the perceived association between identity and conflict.

### Participants

The selected regional sport commission operates with 25 board and executive committee members and four (4) paid staff. First, all 29 individuals were invited to participate in the interview portion of the study. In total, 11 individuals agreed to be interviewed (four staff and seven board members). The board members that

declined to participate indicated scheduling conflicts as reasons for non-participation. The interview guide was semistructured in nature (Patton, 2002). Semistructured interviews allow for consistency among participants and give individual's freedom to tell stories that elaborated on and justified their opinions (Patton, 2002); a number of interview participants took advantage of this opportunity. The guide (see Appendix) included questions regarding perceptions of individual, group, and organizational identity, as well as the participants' definition of their "in-group" and any potential "out-groups" in their commission. Further, the participants were asked to comment on whether status and compatibility conflict was present in their commission, and the factors they felt influenced the presence of these two types of disagreement.

Second, onsite observations at board meetings and events hosted by the sport commission were conducted by the researcher over a six-month time period. Specifically, the researcher attended four monthly meetings and six events (i.e., state track and field championships, local archery competitions) that were attended by both paid staff and volunteer board members. The observations were completed post-interview collection and were used to identify in-group and out-group formation, as well as any disagreement that may have existed within the sport commission. The formidable strength of observing the participants was to allow the opportunity to see things that may routinely escape the awareness of participants and thus may not come to mind (or they may not be willing to discuss) in the interview process (Patton, 2002). This also allowed the researcher the opportunity to record interaction and behavior of those individuals unable to take part in the interview portion of the study.

The observations involved the researcher as an active onlooker (i.e., sitting at the table at meetings and actively volunteering at the events; Patton, 2002). This allowed the participants to interact with one another as if the researcher was a part of their context. The researcher was introduced to the sport commission staff and board members prior to observing their interactions and the goal of examining the nature of their work and operation was known. Onlooker observations involved note taking regarding who was involved in or included in conversations (the collective, in-groups, out-groups), the content and tone of conversations (friendly, work-related, or both), and the content, intensity, and personnel involved in disagreements (where applicable).

A method consistent with constant comparative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to (a) compare data in relation to a priori codes, (b) identify emergent codes, and (c) establish relationships amongst coded categories. Analysis took place using NVivo 9.0. This program aided in the systematic arrangement of codes into themes and helped create a paper trail for external audits. Observational data was analyzed to further enhance the credibility of the findings and confirm or challenge the themes uncovered within the interview data (Patton, 2002). For instance, many of the participants indicated that there was "no conflict at this time";

however, low-intensity interpersonal conflicts were noted by the researcher during observations. The final themes were member-checked by the participants, and discussions with each participant took place post-analysis to review the findings of the study. This allowed for peer-debriefing and support from the participants enhanced credibility and trustworthiness to the themes presented below.

## Findings and Discussion

The following findings and discussion are grouped by the themes that were uncovered in the data, and are represented by the following: (a) organizational identity was present within the sport commission context, (b) in-group/out-group formation exists and may contribute to status conflict, and (c) leadership (both formal and informal) helps shape organizational identification and manage conflict. To enhance anonymity, selected quotations are referenced by a participant pseudonym.

### Organizational Identity

The findings indicate that organizational identity is present within this regional sport commission. In fact, all 11 participants within the interviews indicated that they felt they “fit in” at their sport commission. Most were fairly strong in this conviction; although one board member stated, “not sure if I fit in, but I think so” (Melissa). Furthermore, six of the 11 participants used the term “we” and “us” when describing their work with the commission. For instance, when asked to describe a typical day at the commission Adam (a paid staff member) began to discuss his interaction with external stakeholders at events, “Yeah. They don’t, I don’t think they fully know but we tell them, we try to keep them as informed as we can. And that’s all we can really do.” The reference to “we” and “they” was also apparent in the observation notes as board and staff members would use this terminology when speaking with other individuals outside of the commission at events. The consistent use of “we” and “they” to separate in and out group members is similar to the definition of organizational identity outlined by Mael and Ashforth (1992), and supports the presence of identification in this context.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) acknowledged that organizational identification involves the perception of oneness with and belongingness to the organization. The present study may contribute to the understanding of how “belongingness” is discussed within a specific sport context, and may encourage reconceptualization of how identification is operationalized in sport organizations. For instance, the participants were asked to describe how and why they felt they “fit in” within their sport commission. From those responses, individuals indicated that they identified with the commission’s goals (seven participants), recognized a strong fit between the strength and experience of both board and staff (six participants), were allowed freedom of expression within the organizational context (four participants), and that every individual recognized and valued conflicting points of view (two participants). Here, it is clear that the participants place a value on having a

voice and common goal within their sport commission; however, do emphasize the importance of not losing their own values in the process. The ability to be “oneself” within an organizational identity is a factor that may be particularly relevant in the voluntary-based sport sector where a number of individuals with different backgrounds are coming together to work with one another during board meetings and special events. Sport management in particular is a context where shared leadership is predominant (see Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003) and multiple power players may require the recognition of individuals rather than the removal of self for the purposes of organizational identity. This context may then present unique aspects of organizational identification that are not currently addressed when extracting and measuring items from the general management literature (i.e., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). For instance, it may be particularly relevant to include “ability to express one’s self” as fundamental to the definition of organizational identification in sport.

### **Influence of In-Group/Out-group Formation on Conflict**

Despite the acknowledgment of organizational identification, the interview participants also identified in-group and out-group formation based on what they termed “paid staff versus board members” (eight participants), “old versus new guard” (four participants), and functional separation (i.e., hoteliers and non-hoteliers; four participants). For example, the distinction of paid staff and board members was clearly made along the lines of “us” (paid staff) and “them” (volunteer board member). Additionally, old versus new guard was seen in, for instance, “us” (long tenured board members) and “them” (newly tenured board members). To demonstrate, Jen (a paid staff member) began to discuss her interactions with the board members of the commission and commented, “...then there’s some board members that I don’t really interact with so I don’t feel as comfortable with them ...” As noted in previous research, subgroup identities tend to form when functional, information, surface level, and geographic divides exist within groups (Bezrukova et al. , 2011; Bezrukova, Thatcher, & Jehn, 2007; Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009; Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Lau & Murnighan, 2005; Li & Hambrick, 2005), which may be particularly prevalent in voluntary-based organizations where these divides are built into the structure of the board-staff relationship. Furthermore, this supports the tenets of social categorization theory and the formation of in-group and out-group membership that may occur within an organization (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and may highlight the potential for faultline or conflict formation.

The participants in the current study went on to discuss their perceived reasons for not fitting in to particular subgroups. These included new members feeling ‘out of the loop’ (four participants), not knowing people’s names in other groups (three participants), and using “them and they” when referring to other organizational members (two participants). This goes beyond simple classification of in and out group members and begins to provide insight into the evaluation

and emotional components of social identity and categorization in this setting (Ellemers et al., 1999). For example, the participants acknowledged that in-group/out-group formation had the potential to contribute to status conflict; however, this type of disagreement was controlled when organizational identity was high and compatibility conflict was low. Specifically, the participants suggested that they have a positive identification (i.e., evaluation) with the sport commission, and thus are emotionally attached and tenaciously defend that identity (i.e., emotional). Highlighting that although in-groups and out-groups may exist, the positive evaluation and emotional strength of their organizational identity softens any potential tension between these two groups.

When asked to discuss the reasons for low status conflict many participants discussed the notion that “we” get along and a common goal is appreciated where competing for status was viewed as contradictory to that goal. Despite the formation of in-groups, a number of participants (eight) noted that they felt a positive connection to the success and failure of the sport commission and that the commission was their primary method of defining themselves. This connection to the organization was particularly relevant for controlling status conflict. For instance, Jim (volunteer board member) discussed a strong organizational identity and acknowledged that he felt he “was” the sport commission. His organizational identity may be a contributing factor when he discusses a potential power struggle that was negated or diffused,

And [Executive Director] has always maneuvered the board more than I think he ought to. And I told him this and I told other board members this, it's no damn secret. We get along, it's open. Now, having said all that, right at the moment, it's not killing us [the power struggles]. It's ok. It's not the beginning and the end of the world.

For the eight participants who discussed a thwarting of status conflict, it was clear that power struggles were present between board and paid staff or old versus new guard; however, the connection to the organization and wanting to contribute to organizational effectiveness often prevented these dysfunctional disputes. Furthermore, four participants noted that the presence of in-group/out-group classification could potentially lead to power struggles if intense personality conflicts arose between members of different groups. Interestingly, the potential moderating influence of personality conflict on status conflict highlights the multi-dimensionality of interpersonal conflict in this context. For instance, if one form of interpersonal conflict can influence the impact of the other then dissecting their antecedents becomes more paramount to sport conflict theory and practice.

Within the participant observations, it was clear which individuals and groups possess status or power in the sport commission. This is seen in the command of

conversation and the attention placed on certain groups/people when they are speaking. For other organizational members, it was almost an honor to listen to those in power speak. There was immediate attention given when certain individuals begin a discussion and the room seemed to fall silent with anticipation. Moreover, the formal leaders respect the power of informal leaders and there was compatibility and consistent personalities among those that exert power over others. For example, within one meeting there was a discussion over the sport event bid that was coming up. The group that was sitting to my right was clearly the “old guard” and some of the what they were saying was not agreed upon by the “new guard”; however, they were cordial to each other prior to and after the discussion (joking and asking about family), which allowed for the balance of power to stay with the old guard, and status or compatibility conflict did not escalate. This was an interesting dynamic that was consistent throughout meetings and across a variety of events hosted by staff and board members. When informally asked why the situation did not escalate, one board member stated, “We simply want what is best for the commission (organization).”

The connection between social identity and categorization has yet to be empirically linked to the presence of interpersonal conflict. This complex association may be particularly relevant in the voluntary-based sport context where management of disagreement resulting from physical (i.e., geography) or structural (i.e., paid staff versus board members) in-group/out-group formation is inevitable (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Specifically, positive (evaluation) identification with the sport commission as a whole creates an emotional attachment that goes beyond the subgroups that are formed, and essentially controls potential relationship conflict among members. This control over relationship degeneration based on subgroup formation may apply specifically to sport organizations as emotional connections to organizational identity tend to be stronger in the sport setting (Todd & Kent, 2009).

### **Management Role of Leadership**

The important role of multiple leaders (both formal and informal) in helping develop an organizational identity was an emergent theme within the interview data that was also corroborated by the observational findings. The importance of “looking to” multiple individuals that were “on the same page” with regard to the sport commission’s mission helped participants who possessed in-group/out-group identities to look beyond the group differences and work together toward a collective objective. First, the participants noted that leaders must be effective communicators that bridge gaps between in-groups and out-groups (seven participants), support common goals (seven participants), are open-minded and respect multiple opinions (four participants), political (three participants), are respected and trusted (three participants) and understand and respect the history of the commission and the members (two participants). The effectiveness of



leadership in managing these functions was consistently described as the reason for high organizational identification and reduced interpersonal conflict in this sport commission. This supports Kerwin et al. (2011) who suggested that leaders play a large role in controlling conflict within sport organizations; however, the findings here extend this work by highlighting the role leaders' play in developing organizational identity and managing in-group/out-group formation. One board member went on to state,

I think that because there is that open communication and clarity of understanding about where things are going, and, you know, the confidence in the leadership, you know, [Executive Director] knows what he's doing and he's good at it so there's a lot of trust there as well. (Leanne)

Further, each of the seven participants who discussed the importance of proactive communication to bridge gaps between in-groups and out-groups went on to acknowledge that the leaders in this case did not always have to be "formal leaders." They indicated individuals were acknowledged as informal leaders, and were respected and followed just the same as formal leaders. Multiple leaders were seen as functional and worked in conjunction (not combat) with one another. Kreutzer and Jager (2011) noted that the leaders in their study were in fact the main source of fragmented organizational identity due to dual leadership structures that seemed to be striving for separate and competing goals. Conversely, in the current context shared leadership was emphasized and used to actively manage in-group/out-group formation. The structure and maintenance of shared leadership in the sport context requires further empirical examination.

Open communication between commission members and multiple leaders was noted throughout data collection. DeRue and Ashford (2010) highlighted the importance of recognizing the influence of those who "claim" leadership through their role or title, and those who are "granted" leadership through their actions and behavior within the organizational context. The granting of multiple leadership roles to individuals within this sport commission suggests that shared leadership may be a characteristic that is embraced in a particular environment (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). Shared leadership is characterized by shared purpose, social support, and members having a voice (Carson et al., 2007), all of which were identified by the interview participants as being characteristics of the leaders identified in the sport commission. Carson et al. (2007) found that shared leadership predicted positive team performance; however, the current finding may extend these conclusions as shared leadership was discussed as positively shaping collective organizational culture and reducing dysfunctional conflict. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that an exploration of shared leadership within similar sport contexts may shed light on the development and maintenance of social identity and conflict.



The influence of these leaders was also observed at both board meetings and events. The author observed a trust and connection to several individuals who were clearly the leaders within the sport commission. When a rallying of the group was needed, these individuals stepped up to either promote the goals of the commission or encourage communication among in-group and out-group members. At one particular event hosted by the commission, a board member and staff member were losing sight of the event goal and it was clear they were not working together to accomplish their tasks. Two informal leaders within the board then stepped in and began to open the communication lines between the individuals and showed a respect for both individual's points of view and expertise. It was a simple gesture, but it brought the two out-group members together and allowed them to refocus on what was best for the commission. This diffusion of disagreement by the leadership within the commission may suggest a moderating association on the development of interpersonal conflict from organizational identity (or a lack thereof).

The influence of shared leadership may be particularly relevant in sport organizations where the presence of shared leadership is prominent (Auld & Godbey, 1998; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003; Shilbury, 2001). Specifically, in voluntary-based sport organizations there is often times a surplus of individuals who have been leaders in their sport, yet must share leadership roles when they enter the sport workplace on either a paid staff or voluntary basis. As such, it is important for multiple leaders to recognize their place in shaping organizational identity and thus their role in reducing dysfunctional forms of conflict.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study provides a foundation for understanding the role of identity in the perception of interpersonal conflict in a voluntary-based sport context. The following section provides an overview of the recommendations for future study and practice; however, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that arose within the study. First, selecting one case as the positively deviant context may have removed other positively deviant cases as potential candidates for collection and analysis. Although several steps were taken to meet with and observe the other sport commissions at a national level conference, the potential for alternative positively deviant cases in this region should be acknowledged and their omission may have influenced the findings seen here. Second, the participants knew that the researcher was present within their commission for the purpose of analyzing their perceptions and actions. As such, behaviors and responses may have been altered to give a more favorable view of self or commission. Given the extended period of time that the researcher spent with the commission and its members (6-8 months), it is reasonable to assume that the researcher became a part of the setting. Thus, over time the initial influence of the researcher in this setting was reduced (Patton, 2002). Nonetheless, the potential respondent bias is acknowledged and continued research is suggested.

Specifically, the findings here provide a benchmark for future research that assesses the association between social identity and conflict. Specifically, structural equation modeling associated with factors influencing the formation of organizational identity and further reducing dysfunctional conflict is suggested. For instance, the predictive formation of organizational identity to status and compatibility conflict, moderated by proactive leadership, is ripe for empirical confirmation in the sport organization context. The association may be particularly relevant in organizations where in-group and out-group formation exists within the structure of the context (i.e., non-profit organizations, large organizations with multiple departments).

Further, the findings imply the need to re-examine our conceptualization and operationalization of social identity when looking at organizations in specific contexts. For example, defining the categorization, evaluation, and emotional attachment aspects of social identity theory (Ellemers et al., 1999) may strengthen our definition of social identity and increase understanding regarding its influence in the sport management context.

The findings also suggest that it is important to further investigate the nature of interpersonal conflict. For instance, there is support for status and compatibility conflict and the participants described both types of disagreement as potentially having unique influence on one another (i.e., compatibility conflict controlling when status conflict emerges). Continued empirical examination should be completed to investigate the nature of these two types of conflict in a variety of sport management contexts to uncover how and when each form is perceived by group members.

Defining the role of multiple leaders in the management of conflict and social identity formation may also contribute to knowledge in this area. Specifically, understanding how and why shared leadership is fostered in certain sport contexts may help contribute to theoretical knowledge regarding this leadership phenomenon. Moreover, comparison across profit, voluntary and public sport agencies may provide a comprehensive picture of where shared leadership is used as a management strategy and the impact that it has on group and individual outcomes.

Finally, identity and conflict may mean different things to individuals in different cultures. For instance, those individuals in more individualist cultures may find organizational identity to be problematic and unorthodox and thus the influence on disagreement may vary. Specifically, disagreement and perceptions of fairness generally vary by culture in terms of their acceptance and influence (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007), which suggests that a comparison of identity to conflict across nations or cultures may be ripe for empirical investigation.

The findings of this study also lend themselves to implications for sport managers; and managers in small voluntary-based sport organizations in particular. Given that in-group/out-group formation was identified by participants based on “board versus staff” and “old versus new guard,” it is recommended that these

groups be acknowledged and appropriately managed; not eliminated. Specifically, when there is a board versus staff divide, it would be useful to create situations where board and staff operate or function together on a more consistent basis. Allocating tasks that require board member and staff cooperation may heighten interaction and thus remove barriers. Further, regarding old versus new guard group formation, the creation of a mentorship program where older more experienced staff work with younger less tenured individuals may provide a common bound that relieves potential tension between these two groups.

As noted, identification with a subgroup can have a positive emotional connection for an individual. Therefore, attempting to remove these groups all together could become problematic. As such, sport leaders should work to create a common organizational identity where individuals from all groups can connect and fit in with members that might be viewed as out-group (e.g., board members and staff). Collectively producing the values, mission, and vision of the sport commission and continually evaluating their utility and effectiveness could help individuals develop a collective orientation where identity is defined by a connection to the organization as a whole (Hogg & Terry, 2000). An annual meeting for all paid staff and board members could focus on the establishment of core values for the organization where each individual gets a voice in the values that represent the collective. Hiring, training, and evaluation could encapsulate these values, which stand to represent the collective identity of the organization. As such, a continuous review of the values allows each member to provide input into what it means to be a member of the organization.

Further, commissions may want to foster and use shared leadership to control dysfunctional conflict and bridge gaps between in-group/out-group divides by establishing member ownership and identity with the organization as a whole. Shared leadership may take the form of empowering individuals and providing opportunities to all members (board members and paid staff) to take leadership positions in their areas of expertise. Further, partnering, defined by free and open communication where members are comfortable voicing their opinion and offering suggestions to improve group functioning, may open lines of communication and mutual understanding that are essential to creating a positive organizational identity. As noted within the findings, a strong organizational identity will reduce in-group/out-group divides and mitigate debilitating disagreement among members.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

#### Introductory Questions

1. What is your role/title with [your sport organization]?
2. How long have you been involved with the Sports Commission (in any capacity)?
3. How long have you been in your current role/title?
4. What brought you to [your sport organization]?

#### Main Questions

1. When conducting work with/for the sports commission, are tasks often accomplished in groups or individually?

##### **Probe**

- a. In general, do you prefer working in groups or alone?
  - b. Can you describe a particularly positive experience that you have had working individually/in a group with the sports commission?
    - i. Was there something in particular that made this experience come to mind?
  - c. Can you describe a particularly negative experience working individually/in a group with the sports commission?
    - i. Was there something in particular that made this experience come to mind?
2. Do you perceive yourself as “fitting in” with other staff, officers, and trustees at the sports commission?

##### **Probe**

    - a. What factors influence that feeling of fitting in (or not fitting in) with any particular group in the sports commission?
  3. Can you describe a recent successful project associated with the sports commission?
  4. Can you describe a recent failed project associated with the sports commission?



## Organizational Identity and Interpersonal Conflict

5. Do you feel like the sports commission's successes are your successes?
6. Similarly, do you feel like the sports commission's failures are your failures?
7. Are there power struggles, even minor, within your sports commission?  
**Probe**
  - a. If so, can you provide an example (without naming names)? If not, why do you think that power struggles are not present in the sport commission?
8. Are there personality conflicts in your sports commission?  
**Probe**
  - a. If so, can you provide an example (without naming names)? If not, why do you think that personality conflicts are not present in the sport commission?
9. How do you define personal success/performance in your role with [your sport organization]?  
**Probe**
  - a. Are you ever formally evaluated? If yes, what are the typical evaluation criteria? If no, in your opinion what would that evaluation look like (i.e., what would you be evaluated on in a performance review)?
10. Imagine you were given an award from the city for the work that you do that is "above and beyond" your job description/role requirements/etc. with the sports commission. Can you explain activities that you might be engaged in that would be deserving of this award?  
**Note:** These 'activities' can be either within the commission or external to the commission.
11. What makes an effective leader?

## Management Whitepaper

# Exploring Organizational Identity and Interpersonal Conflict in Sport Organizations

Shannon Kerwin

## I. Research Problem

The purpose of this paper is to examine how social identity influences status and compatibility conflict in regional sport commissions within one state in the United States. Relevant to the current state of the sport management industry and the potential negative impact that interpersonal conflict can have on group and organizational effectiveness, knowledge regarding the nature of each type of interpersonal conflict and their antecedent conditions may be enhanced by application of social identity theory. Specifically, exploring what individuals identify with and how that identity influences interpersonal conflict is particularly relevant in the voluntary-based context where a tangible divide in social identity (e.g., paid staff versus board members) already exists. This article will likely be useful to sport managers who operate in sport organizations with multiple departments where the potential for sub-group formation may cause conflict among paid staff and/or volunteer boards of directors. Other sport managers who deal with personnel who work in groups or departments may also benefit from understanding the factors that reduce interpersonal disagreement.

## II. Issues

*Interpersonal conflict* consists of incompatible personality and communication styles, aggressive statements about the utility of different ideas, influence and power within a group, and challenges to the relative contribution an individual makes to a group. Interpersonal conflict is problematic in that status and compatibility disagreements are often associated with decreased satisfaction, motivation, and individual performance among paid staff and volunteer board members. Moreover, *Compatibility conflict* is defined as disagreements that involve incompatible personalities or work styles that are evidenced in the way individuals treat each other. For example, two individuals within a group may both possess overbearing personalities. These are not necessarily different personalities, but their communication styles may not be compatible during interaction. *Status conflict* is defined as disputes over an individual's relative status position in their social hierarchy; often characterized by conflict over control, power, and respect. For

instance, disagreement over who has more power in the decision making process may occur at a board meeting between an executive director (paid) and board president (non-paid volunteer). Therefore, conflict or tension amongst individuals may be directly related to establishing one's position or identity in a group or organization.

The importance of intragroup conflict on group functioning in voluntary-based sport organizations has been well established in the literature. Specifically, the dysfunctional association of conflict, satisfaction, commitment, and performance in voluntary-based sport organizations has received consistent support in the sport literature, thus highlighting the need to uncover the factors contributing to each conflict type. However, relatively little is known about the conditions that lead to increases in various conflict types. The current study aims to fill this knowledge gap.

### III. Summary

To be concise, the findings of the study indicate that (a) organizational identity is present within the sport commission context; (b) in-group/out-group formation (board members versus staff, and old guard versus new guard) exists and may contribute to increased status conflict; and (c) leadership (both formal and informal) helps shape organizational identification and manage dysfunctional conflict.

### IV. Analysis

The findings highlight the importance of individuals identifying with the goals of the organization and the impact that this identification can have on reducing interpersonal conflict. Given the dysfunctional nature of conflict in sport organizations that often operate with short timelines and restricted scheduling, it is important to recognize the factors and conditions that can potentially reduce conflict and enhance efficiency in group decision-making.

Further, this article defines the role of multiple leaders in the management of conflict and social identity formation. Specifically, understanding how and why shared leadership is fostered in certain sport contexts helps contribute to knowledge regarding appropriate leadership strategies around the formation and maintenance of social identity in the workplace. It was highlighted here that leaders within sport contexts need to be actively aware of how individuals define themselves in sport organizations and foster strategies to promote this collective group development. Participants outlined several strategies to reduce conflict including: (a) fostering effective communicators that bridge gaps between in-groups and out-groups, (b) supporting and promoting common goals, (c) keeping an open-minded and respecting multiple opinions, (d) recognizing the political nature of bridging gaps between individuals, and (e) respecting the history of the sport organization and its members.

## V. Discussion/Implications

Given that in-group/out-group formation was identified by participants based on “board versus staff” and “old versus new guard,” it is recommended that these groups be acknowledged and appropriately managed; not eliminated. Identification with an in-group can have a positive emotional connection for an individual. Therefore, attempting to remove sub-groups in your organization all together could become problematic. As such, sport managers could create a common organizational identity where individuals from all sub-groups (e.g., departments) can connect and fit in with members that might be viewed as out-group (e.g., another department in the organization). Collectively producing the values, mission, and vision of the sport organization and continually evaluating their utility and effectiveness could help individuals develop a collective orientation where identity is defined by a connection to the organization as a whole. Further, sport organizations may want to foster and use shared leadership among both informal and formal leaders to control dysfunctional conflict and bridge gaps between in-group/out-group divides. As acknowledged by the participants in the current study, this may occur by promoting organizational over individual or in-group goals, promoting the mission and values of the commission, and open communication channels between groups that may not normally interact within one another. These steps may open lines of communication and mutual understanding that are essential to creating a positive organizational identity; strategies that are useful to sport managers in any organization that deal with groups or teams of individuals.